California Dreaming

by siophiefandom

Summary: Emily's heading off to Pepperdine, but choosing a school in California has nothing to do with Paige. That dream has died. Or has it? Paily one-shot. K-plus for some language.

California Dreaming

_All the leaves are brown
>And the sky is gray<em>

Emily was humming along with The Mamas and Papas, mumbling, "California Dreaming" each time the chorus rolled around.

Anything to distract herself from the other words swirling around in her head: _You, me, doughnuts and diners._

It seemed like an eternity ago when that had been her California dream. _Their_ California dream. Before "A" and Alison turned the dream into a nightmare.

_This _cross-country drive to California - this was definitely not Emily's dream.

Never mind what everybody else thought.

Once Emily announced that she had chosen Pepperdine, it all began: the knowing smiles, the "oohs" and "ahs" of insinuation, the hugs and best wishes. She tirelessly shut them all down. California was a big state. Palo Alto was hundreds of miles from Malibu. Paige would still be miles away from her.

Miles away in terms of geography. Even farther away in terms of relationship.

Emily wiped her eyes and cranked the music up a little louder as she

remembered those three words that sounded the death knell of her California dream: "I need space."

With those words, the last remnants of Emily's hopes had come crashing down. What followed was a series of bad decisions borne of despair - Talia: Older. Married. Straight. Sara: Manipulative. Conniving. Red coat.

Emily flexed and unflexed her fist at the thought of Sara. The pain in her knuckles was long gone, of course, but the memory of the punch still felt so good. How, she wondered, could she have allowed herself to fall for Sara so quickly? Deep down, she knew the answer. Sara was like Alison in so many ways. The queen bee. The mysterious disappearance. The pretended vulnerability that provided the excuse for her to land in Emily's bed.

So much like Alison. And Emily had always been a sucker for Alison.

_Alison. _Emily knew better than to blame her, but, in her heart, she also knew that Alison was the reason that Paige had moved on. She and Emily had never taken the time to talk through Paige's issues - how eager Emily was to defend Alison; to fall into Alison's arms; _to fall into bed with her._ Emily wasn't sure that Paige even knew about that. When Paige said that she was tired of talking, Emily felt relieved. They could go back to being a couple, the way they were before. Only, they weren't. They had skipped the necessary step of processing everything - Paige's feelings of betrayal; her fear that Emily was always only one small step away from tossing her aside for a better offer. Emily should have told her that she had learned from her mistake; that she had come to realize how _real_ what she had with Paige was; how much she had come to cherish it.

But Paige never brought it up, and Emily just enjoyed the fact that they didn't have to talk about it. Looking back, she realized that they were both relieved to be able to pretend that their Alison-issues were resolved. Only, they weren't. And, ultimately, that was what tore them apart.

It was, Emily had come to realize, a preemptive move on Paige's part. Walk away from love before love breaks my heart.

There was a part of Emily that knew all along that Paige wasn't okay with things. And, when things fell apart, that part of her wondered how long Paige had been scheming her getaway. Maybe Nick and his wife weren't the ones who were so eager to pull up stakes and move to California. Maybe Paige was avoiding the talk with Emily because she had already made up her mind. Maybe she just stringing Emily along until she could make her escape.

Emily went through periods of blaming Paige - for not having enough faith in the love that Emily had for her. She had moments of blaming Alison, for being the cause of the rift between them. And she blamed herself, for ruining any chance that she might otherwise have had of ever winning Paige back by those stupid flings after their breakup.

But she knew that it wasn't fair to assign blame. And, in the end, blame didn't matter. They were where they were. And there was no fixing it.

So, Emily told everyone that going to Pepperdine wasn't about being closer to Paige. If that had been her plan, she told them, she could have gone to any number of colleges closer to Stanford - from Berkeley or Fresno State to the University of San Francico.

Pepperdine was just far enough away for Emily to be able to convince everyone that California wasn't about Paige.

Almost far enough away for Emily to be able to convince herself.

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><p><em>Paige was holding Emily tighter and tighter. She wanted to feel every inch of Emily; to feel like a part of Emily - an extension of Emily's body - with not even the shadow of a gap between them. Emily's head lay on Paige's shoulder as they danced, and, without even looking down at her, Paige knew that Emily's eyes were closed. She loved that. She loved that Emily felt safe; protected; at peace in her arms. She breathed deeply of Emily's scent as her index finger raised goosebumps up Emily's spine, laid bare in her prom dress. In that moment, everything was perfect. Everything was Emily.
<em>

**All the leaves are brow...**

"Damn it!" Paige yelled as she reached for her phone to silence the alarm with a swipe, resisting the urge to send it crashing against the far wall of her bedroom. The ringtone that she once thought would be cute, in an ironic way, now only served to mock her, supplying a daily reminder of her pain. The pain that she, herself, was the cause of.

Paige sat up in her bed, pulling the up blanket around her shoulders against the chill of the air-conditioned room. With a long, low groan, she ran her fingers through her hair and let them stay dug-in there as her forehead crashed against the heel of her palms.

I need space. The words resounded in her head; their sharp contrast to her recurring dream, where she deliberately set out to eliminate any vestige of space between herself and Emily.

Three thousand miles is a long way. But not far enough to run from the love that still haunted her.

Maybe four years would be a long enough time.

_A lot could happen. _Only, nothing could happen. The remainder of what would've been Paige's senior year - and all of her summer - were spent in rigorous training under the watchful eyes of the best coaches money could buy. And by taking classes. The more credits she could rack up before the official start of her freshman year, the lighter the academic load she would have to carry at Stanford. More time to hone her skills. Nick, of course, had it all worked out.

So Paige didn't have time to think about what might have been. Except at night. Except in those lonely hours when sleep evaded her, and, when it came, brought with it that all-too-familiar, recurring dream that always ended the same way. So close... so tantalizingly close.

But always just a dream.

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><p>Emily couldn't stop staring at the booth in the corner. At the couple who were on obvious first-date behavior. The girl in the denim skirt kept leaning a little too obviously close to...<p>

Paige. The only reason that Emily had for staring into the booth.

It'd been two and a half years. Two and a half years of proof that Emily was right: Although she and Paige were both in California, it was as if they were in different states. There was no reason for them to run into each other. They never had, in two and a half years. But now - out of all the bars in all the world, Paige shows up at hers.

What was Paige even doing in Pepperdine, Emily wondered. Actually, she wondered _what the fuck _Paige was doing there. Pepperdine didn't swim against Stanford. And swim season was over anyway.

Emily stayed one step ahead of Paige's eyes, quickly turning around and pretending to tend to the rack of bottles behind the bar whenever she sensed that Paige's head was about to swivel in her direction. But she underestimated Paige. It may have been almost three years, but Paige still remembered Emily's golden complexion. The curve of Emily's midsection. Most of all, she remembered the way that Emily moved.

When Emily turned to face the bar and steal another glance, her breath hitched. Paige was no longer sitting there. Paige was on the move, heading straight for her!

Emily quickly dried her hands on her apron and announced to Biff, the other bartender, "I'm going on break!" That was as far as her plan went.

She made it two steps from the door before she gasped at the feeling of a hand on her shoulder, closing her eyes at the sound of that familiar rasp.

"Emily."

If Paige believed in fate, she would have believed that there was a reason that she and Shana had stumbled into that particular bar on that particular evening.

Emily relaxed her shoulders, wiping her hands with her apron nervously as she turned around with her well-practiced, forced smile. "Paige," she said softly, dipping her head - sharing a single chuckle with Paige at the fact that Paige had dipped hers at the very same time.

Emily tugged at her collar, pulling her shirt slightly more closed. She was dressed for her job, showing just enough skin to tease an extra tip out of the sleazy middle-aged men at the bar. She suddenly felt obvious and exposed in front of Paige, who had the smart, confident look of a student-athlete.

It was the grown-up version of their meeting in The Brew back in high school, when Paige was dressed to kill in her little black dress, and Emily just looked like roadkill.

"What are you doing here?" Emily dared the briefest glance into Paige's eyes.

"I might ask you the same question."

Inside, Paige was cursing herself for having cut herself off from Emily and all of her friends on social media. As a result, she had no warning that Emily was on the same coast, and no clue why. But, at the same time, Paige knew that she never really had a choice about cutting herself off. She couldn't have handled seeing Emily's pictures and interactions with her new girlfriend. Or, more likely, her string of new girlfriends.

"I... I live here, now." _Stupid, Emily! She doesn't think that you commute to California for your bartending job!_ "I go to Pepperdine." Emily had told that lie often enough that it almost felt as if it were still the truth.

Paige found her eyes drifting of their own accord to a flash of color - the strapless red top peeking subtly through space between the left and right plackets of Emily's soft white blouse. Red wasn't a color that she necessarily associated Emily, but there was no denying that it worked for her.

Catching herself before her eyes lingered too long, she met Emily's eyes and admitted, understatedly enthusiastic, "Well you look great."

Emily knew what she looked like. She knew that Paige was lying. Stretching the truth, at best. Common courtesy. She should've called Paige on it - _"Don't, Paige. We don't have to play those games with each other. Not anymore."_ But, instead, she found herself landing her fingers on Paige's forearm, and letting her lips stretch into the shy smile of a pathetic school girl. She quickly recovered, tucking her hair behind her ear. "I've got to go," she said abruptly, with no further explanation as she spun around, not giving Paige time to question her or try to stop her.

Confident that Paige wasn't foolhardy enough to approach the bar again, Emily, when she returned from her impromptu break, was a little more bold in checking out the booth where Paige and her date were still sitting and chatting. She found herself sneering as she looked over, wiping down the bar. This bitch clearly wasn't Paige's type. She was the kind of girl who was good for a night, at best - and no need to bother hanging around the next morning for the girl to wake up. Emily shook her head in disgust at what Paige had become.

* * *

><p>"You made quite an impression on someone," Katie said, brandishing a folded piece of paper. Emily furrowed her brow and gave the waitress a confused smile. "I told her that I couldn't give you her number, but..." - Katie gave Emily a glimpse of a fifty-dollar bill - "she was rather persuasive." After giving Emily a chance to come up to speed with what she was saying, she added, "And she didn't seem bothered that her date was sitting right there."<p>

Emily turned slightly as she took the note. Katie smiled in anticipation, looking over Emily's shoulder.

Emily unfolded the slip of paper, standing paralyzed until Katie spoke again.

"So, do you _know_ this girl?" she asked, noticing that her customer hadn't written her name on the note.

"Huh?" Emily shook off her daze. "No!" she insisted, scoffing in mock-anger at the supposed stranger's audacity. She tore the sheet of paper in half, and in half one more time before she tossed it into the waste.

"Aww," Katie said, patting Emily's shoulder a couple of times with a pout. "She looked cute!"

As soon as Katie was out of sight, Emily grabbed a pad and pencil to write down the ten digits before they fled from her memory forever.

* * *

><p>Emily never called.<p>

She couldn't do it. She couldn't be _just friends_ with Paige. She didn't need to hear about all of Paige's conquests - in and out of the pool - didn't need to be an eyewitness to her academic and social successes, didn't need to have to come up with an excuse to turn down the invitation to her graduation. Or her wedding. And she didn't need to have to make up stories to cover up the fact that she wasn't in school, didn't need Paige looking down on her with condescending sympathy, didn't need Paige's voice added to the chorus of others who incessantly assured her that a great girl like her would find someone - eventually.

When Biff told her that she had a phone call at the bar, she was suspicious. "Who is it?"

Biff leaned back into the phone and parroted, "Who is it?" Looking back at Emily, he announced, "It's Hanna." Emily shook her head vigorously, swiping her hand back forth under her neck with her fingers pointed at her throat, cueing Biff to make up some excuse for her.

Emily was livid. The only person who both knew Hanna and knew that Emily was working at the bar was Paige. Paige must've reached out to Hanna, telling her how pathetic Emily's life had become and urging her to intervene. Typical Paige â€" going behind Emily's back in the name of protecting her.

Biff's voice interrupted Emily's private rage-party. "She says it's important." Emily just shook her head all the more vigorously, now swiping both hands in front of her neck. There was no way. Biff covered up the phone and said, just above a whisper, "I think she's drunk."

Emily dropped her shoulders and tilted her head in frustration, stepping behind the bar to reach for the phone.

"Hanna?"

"Emily?"

Emily did a double-take at the voice, holding the receiver at arm's length and staring at it, as if she had somehow picked up the wrong phone. "Paige?"

"You never called me, Emily!"

"Paige, are you drunk?"

"I'm _sorry_, okay?" Paige drunkenly pleaded, ignoring Emily's question.

Emily recognized this drunk conversation as the grown up version of Paige riding her bike through the rain to Emily's house. And she suddenly panicked for Paige's safety, remembering how that earlier story had played out.

"Paige, where are you?"

Paige was crying as she repeated her apology. Emily had rarely seen her drunk, but, if Paige's behavior that night when she drank from the flask laced with Melizopam was any indication, things were liable to get pretty emotional.

"It's okay, Paige. It's okay." Emily didn't know what Paige was apologizing for. That wasn't the point. Paige's safety was. "Where are you, Paige?"

"It's not okay. You didn't call me. I waited for two weeks, and you never called me, Em... -ily." Paige corrected herself quickly, thinking that she was no longer entitled to use the shortened version of her ex-girlfriend's name.

"Paige, Iâ€¦ â€“ I'm sorry. I lost your number." _And the lying continues._ "Please, Babe, just tell me where you are." Emily never used that term with Paige â€“ or anyone, really. She hoped that, somehow, its unfamiliarity would stick out, and help her get through Paige's addled mind.

"I'm right here," Paige answered weakly.

"Where's 'here,' Paige?"

"Stanford," Paige whined, as if the answer was obvious.

"Paige, I need an address."

Emily gestured for Biff to hand her a pen, and she frantically scribbled down the address as Paige squeaked it out. "Don't do anything, Paige. Just wait for me, okay? You promise?"

"I'll wait," Paige replied, defeated.

Emily huffed as she hung up the phone. She ran her fingers through her hair, grabbing tight fists full of it as she contemplated the six-hour drive ahead of her. "Biffâ€¦"

Biff nodded. "I'll cover for you."

Emily gave him a hug. "You're a lifesaver."

* * *

><p>Emily picked up the biggest latte she could find, and plenty of
sugary snacks. It was insane. In six hours, Paige would be sobered up
â€" or hungover. She might not even remember having
called.<p>

Still, Emily had to go, for reasons that she couldn't explain or
fully understand in the moment. But it was always the same reason.
Paige needed her. Or she needed Paige. It was hard to tell where one
truth ended and the other began.

Emily settled into the driver's seat with a sigh. Her old car had
been through a lot since that semi-optimistic cross-country drive a
couple of years back. It seemed a mere shell of its former self - in
large part because Emily couldn't afford to maintain it properly,
with so many more-pressing bills to pay. Maybe a six-hour drive in
that car wasn't the best idea.

Emily punched in the address that Paige had given her, having to hit
several of the keys on the screen more than once to get them to take.
The display was almost shot, but the voice commands still came
through, and that would have to be enough.

This was what Emily's life had become: making do; finding a way to
get things to work.

She didn't have time think about that.

As she put the car in gear, she reached for the radio, but thought
better of it. She needed to get Paige on the line; to keep her
talking, to make sure that she didn't do anything foolish.

At least, that's how she justified it to herself as she called the
number that she had saved in her phone but never used.

"Hello?" Paige wondered in response to an unknown number from a
familiar area code.

"Paige!"

"Emily!" There was a contentment in Paige's voice, like that of
someone home at last after months at sea.

Emily was stuck for a moment, not having thought ahead about what she
would say. She ended up going with narration. "I'm on my way."

Paige sighed. "You're good to me," she mused, her drunken self having
forgotten that they no longer had that kind of relationship - and
hadn't, for years.

Emily could hear a rustling on the other end of the line as Paige sat
up, suddenly serious. "I can't let you drive all the way up here,
Emily. I can meet you half way!"

"No!" Emily's command was swift and authoritative. "Don't go anywhere

near a car, Paige! Do you hear me?"

"But it's too far to ride my bicycle, Emily!"

Emily chuckled to herself at the way that Paige's drunk lips pushed out her name. It was almost like two names - "Emma-Lee." That wasn't quite it. It was more as if Paige had managed to find another syllable in the five letters. Whatever it was, Emily couldn't muse on it very long. She had to keep Paige safe.

"Just sit tight, okay, Paige? I'll be there in six hours!" _God_. Emily didn't fully realize just how ridiculous her little road trip was until she said it out loud.

"I won't move a muscle," Paige asserted.

Emily got the sense that Paige was about to hang up. "Paige? Stay on the line!"

Paige yawned. "I'm sleepy, Emily!"

"No! If I'm driving all this way, you have to stay on the line and keep me awake!" Emily shook her head. She remembered the days when she and Paige could spend hours effortlessly talking on the phone. Or not talking, but just knowing that the other was there. But right then, where they were at that moment, she had no idea how she and Paige could find even a minute's worth of material to talk about.

"Okay!" Paige was game. "What do you want to talk about?"

Yeah, what?

Emily didn't want to talk about Paige's love life. Or hers. Or Paige's swimming. Or hers. Or Paige's college years. Or hers.

That was the thing. Any topic would only lead to a "What about you?" question. So, Emily diverted.

"Why are you drunk at 3:00 in the afternoon?"

Paige sighed. The alcohol may have made her lay her emotions bare, but she wasn't willing to admit the real â€" and obvious â€" reason. She shrugged her shoulders and then, realizing that Emily couldn't see, uttered a weak, "I don't know."

"You don't know, huh?"

Silence.

"Paige, have you eaten anything?"

"Huh?"

"Eat something! Get some food in your stomach. Some bread, or something, to soak up some of that alcohol."

"All righty," Paige said, pleasantly drunk. "I'll see what I can find!"

"No, don't leave the house!"

"I meant in the kitchen, Emily!"

Emily nodded her head, relieved. Her relief only lasted until she heard a loud crash. "Paige!"

"Whoopsie!" Paige lisped. "Wrong cabinet!"

Emily sighed. She could feel her eyebrows starting to twitch.

"Let's see. Pop Tarts! Pop Tarts are bread!"

"Yes," Emily said in a calming voice. "Pop Tarts are bread. Pop Tarts are good. Sit down and eat your Pop Tarts, Paige."

"Now where is that toaster?"

"Just eat them raw, Paige." Emily wasn't sure that Paige was equipped to deal with a heat-producing device in her drunken state.

"But they're Pop Tarts, Emily!"

"I know what they are, Paige." Emily was failing in her attempt to keep the frustration from coming through her voice.

"Know why they call them Pop Tarts?" Paige persisted, pleasantly oblivious.

"I know why, Paige."

"They just - POP! - out of the toaster."

"Paige, stay away from the toaster."

Paige let out a good-natured sigh. "Okey dokey!"

"Please just sit down, Paige."

"Okey dokey!"

"Are you sitting down?"

"Mm hmm," Paige replied, with a mouth full of Pop Tart.

" Good. Now talk to me."

"About what?"

Emily huffed, running a hand through her hair and gesturing at the windshield in frustration before returning her hand to the steering wheel. "Anything, Paige! Keep me awake!"

Silence.

"Shall I sing you a lullaby that my beloved Scottish grandmother used to sing to me?"

"No!" Emily giggled at the ridiculousness of it all. "No lullabies!" _Does she not understand the concept of 'keep me awake?'_

"_When Irish eyes are smiling..._"

"Paige!"

"_Sure it's like a morn in spring..._"

"Paige!" Emily giggled, "Nooo lullabiessss!" Shaking her head with a
warm smile, she added, "And that doesn't sound
Scottish!"

"Emma-Lee," Paige said slowly, as if she were divulging a family
secret, "my grandma was Scottish, not the lullaby!"

"Find something else!" Emily was trying her best not to break into
laughter.

So, Paige did her best. She gave Emily a rundown of what she had
eaten and drunk that day. She went through an inventory of everything
that she could see in her room. She gave a brief but comprehensive
overview of the weather. She talked about pretty much anything,
except for those subjects that Emily didn't want to talk about. _It
was almost as if she knew._

After a while, Paige needed a break from talking, so she asked Emily
to describe what she was seeing out of the windshield. Emily
dutifully obliged. Paige's "Uh huhs" of acknowledgment started to
sound more and more like yawns, until, eventually, all that Emily
heard from the other end was a gentle snoring. There was something
very familiar and home-like about the sound, but Emily was still
looking at a good five hours of driving. A good five hours when she
had to stay alert. She ended the call and punched the redial button,
to jolt Paige awake with the ringtone - but she ended that call
before it went through. If Paige was asleep, she would be okay. Emily
had worried that Paige was going to do something stupid or rash, but
she was sleeping it off. Best case, she'd be thinking more clearly
when she woke up. Worst case, she'd be too hungover to do anything
stupid.

So, why am I still driving to Palo Alto?

Emily yawned, long and loud. She couldn't blame Paige for having
fallen asleep. Emily's roadside narration almost had her falling
asleep, herself. She was still much closer to home than to Paige, and
the longer she kept driving, the longer the return trip would
be.

But she had to go. She ticked off the reasons, in an attempt to
convince herself that this was still about Paige and not about
her:

- She had promised Paige.

- Paige might wake up and start drinking again.

- And she might do something stupid.

- Especially if she woke up and found that Emily hadn't followed
through on her promise to come.

Emily checked the time-to-go on the GPS and tapped a little harder on the accelerator.

* * *

><p>Emily blew out a puff of air as she stepped out of the car and walked up to Paige's building. Despite the self-convincing she had done in the car, she didn't know why she was there; didn't know what she would say; didn't know what she would do. And she had no clue what Paige would say or do.<p>

Emily waved through the glass doors at a group of people sitting on a sofa in the lobby. One of the girls got up with a smile and opened the door. Apparently, Emily looked enough like a student to convince them that she belonged there. "Thanks," she smiled, taking a quick peek to locate the elevators without making it look as if she didn't know her way around.

Emily made it up to Paige's floor, counting off the doors until she came to the number that Paige had given her. She knocked on the door and waited. After a while, she realized that Paige was still passed out from her drinking. She was about to call her phone, to wake her up, when she remembered something that Paige had said when she was filling in time during the drive, saying anything that came to mind. Emily stepped across the hall and reached up to the top of the molding above the neighbors' door, feeling around until her fingers knocked a key onto the floor. Emily stooped down to pick it up, reminding herself once again, in a whisper, "This is crazy."

Emily unlocked the door and blocked it open with her purse as she hurried across the hall to return the key to its spot above the neighbors' door.

She entered the semi-darkened room and looked around. When she pushed open the slightly ajar door to what turned out to be Paige's bedroom, she smiled nostalgically at the sight of Paige sleeping, looking at peace. With that question answered â€" Paige was safe â€" Emily went off to find the much-needed bathroom.

* * *

><p>Emily lingered in front of the bathroom mirror, trying to put herself together, before she concluded that it was a futile endeavor. Besides, she reminded herself, she was only there for...<p>

With a heavy sigh, she stopped denying whom she was actually there for. Cocking her head to the side, she made a fist. "Let's do this!"

Emily returned to Paige's bedroom and relocated the pile of clothes that were draped across a chair in the corner onto a footlocker at the foot of Paige's bed. As she pulled the chair up to the bed, she heard Paige sigh in contentment. The sigh got the better of her. She leaned over the bed for a closer look.

Paige looked peaceful, almost smiling. Emily touched her cheek lightly. When she moved her hand away, she couldn't resist ghosting a kiss on the same spot. She was almost certain that she saw Paige's lips stretch slightly into more of a smile.

Paige was having the dream again. She was at the prom again. But, this time, Emily kissed her - ever so softly - on the cheek. Paige knew what was coming next. This was point where her alarm would jolt her awake. Before it could interrupt them again, she forcefully grabbed Emily by the neck and pulled her in for a deep kiss. Emily's tongue felt warm and healing in her mouth. It had been too long.

Emily gasped into Paige's mouth. Nothing could have prepared her for this response from Paige. She honestly hadn't meant to wake Paige with her kiss, but she wasn't complaining about the results.

Paige's breath tasted fresh; minty. _Had she anticipated some kissing when Emily got there? _Emily realized that the more likely scenario was that Paige had rinsed her mouth out after she had thrown up_. Ew. _That thought reminded Emily that Paige was drunk, and that Emily probably shouldn't be taking advantage. But - _damn _- it just felt so right. Emily let herself surrender to the kiss. They could work it out later.

Paige jerked away from the kiss violently, gasping as she sprang out of the bed and into an apology. "Shit! I'm so sorry, Em - I was dreaming..." Paige stopped dead in the middle of that thought. She couldn't tell Emily that, three years later, she was still dreaming about their prom that never happened. When she peeked up to see how much trouble she was in, she saw a shocked expression on Emily's face, and Emily's eyes as wide as saucers.

That's when she realized that her drunken self had crawled into bed naked.

"Oh shit!" Paige scrambled for the sheet and attempted to wrap herself in it.

"It's okay, it's okay," Emily said soothingly. "It's nothing I haven't seen before." Those words had never seemed quite as inappropriate as they sounded to Emily as soon as they were irretrievably out there. But what else could she say?

Paige half-chuckled. "Yeah, I guess not." Paige's hand shifted, and Emily's eyes widened, thinking for a second that her rationalization had convinced Paige that she might as well just drop the sheet. But Paige was actually just running the hand through her hair. "I'm so sorry, Emily." She dipped her head.

"It was an honest mistake," Emily allowed, with a smile.

"No. Not for that," Paige explained, pulling the sheet a little higher over her chest. "For everything. For calling you when I was drunk. For making you come all the way up here. For all of it."

Emily shrugged. "Well, I'm here, now." She patted Paige's cheek a couple of times. "Let's just make the best of it?"

Emily's smile felt like home. Paige nodded, smiling nervously.

"I'll just..." Emily began backing her way out of the room awkwardly, leaning down to pick up her purse, and gesturing vaguely in Paige's direction with her hands. "I'll just give you a moment, shall I?"

Bumping into the wall, she reached behind her to feel her way to the door, pulling it closed behind her as she retreated through it.

Emily leaned her head back against the closed door, looking up at the ceiling. "_What am I doing here?"_ she kept asking herself. She could feel the throbbing of her heart - as well as the throbbing between her thighs. A consequence of the unexpected kiss. She realized that she was smiling. Biting her lip to chase the smile away, she shook her head, meandered over to the couch, and tried to calm herself down by convincing herself that being there with Paige wasn't a good thing.

Cruel experience in California had taught her not to get her hopes up.

* * *

><p>On the other side of the bedroom door, Paige was frantically going through her wardrobe, trying to figure out what she could wear to send the right message. And what "the right message" even was.<p>

In a real sense, standing there naked in front of Emily was easier for Paige than trying to figure out how to dress for her. The fog of Paige's hangover wasn't helping.

She won't even care, Paige tried to convince herself. _She just came in whatever she had on - she didn't go through all this wardrobe drama. God..._ The impact of the fact that Emily had come suddenly hit Paige. She dropped everything and drove the six hours, without Paige having to ask her to. _That had to mean something, didn't it?_

Paige emerged from the bedroom and gestured toward the bathroom. Emily nodded her understanding with a weak smile. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, allowing herself to dream that there was some significance behind Paige's choice of outfit - black jeans topped with a white baseball jersey with black sleeves and a print of an animal's skull on the front. Emily could still make out the stitching from the repairs she had done on the shoulder. Stitched up like Emily's own shoulder, after the injury that cost her her swimming career. Stitched up like their relationship in between those two events - patched together, not as good as new. But good enough to last?

Paige splashed some cold water on her face, looking up at the state of herself with a moan. Catching sight of the stitches on the shoulder of her jersey, she ran her fingers over them as she often did, smiling as she always smiled. She tilted her head to the side with a sigh, heading out to face the future. And her past.

Her brow furrowed when she saw that Emily was no longer on the couch. When she turned into the kitchen, she found out why. Emily was leaning against the kitchen counter, arms folded in front of her, with a half-smile, next to a glass of water and two aspirin. Paige picked up the water and the tablets, tipping the glass towards Emily in thanks. "You found where I keep the aspirin?"

"I know you," Emily said simply. In another time, she would have

stretched out her arms, landing her hands behind Paige's neck and
going in for a quick kiss to punctuate those words. Instead, she
settled for giving Paige's shoulder a squeeze, not hiding the way
that she verified, as she slid her fingers off the shoulder, that her
repairs had held up.

"I suppose you do," Paige replied, downing the aspirin and the water
in one gulp.

As the tablets dissolved and began working their way through Paige's
bloodstream, the walls between her and Emily dissolved, and the two
of them began working their way through the bloody mess of their last
three years.

Paige talked about her life of constant fear and dread; how she
needed a respite - if only to assure herself that, if Emily
eventually moved on from her, Paige would know that she could find a
way to survive.

And Emily talked of being wounded; of having lost her way when she
lost Paige. She admitted that the cruelest blow had been the timing;
just when Emily learned how much she needed Paige, Paige closed that
door. She told Paige everything; told her all the secrets that shame
had kept from telling her best friends and her parents.

The conversation moved from the kitchen to the couch as it moved from
confession to accusation; mourning to blaming; grief to resignation;
tears to hugs - and back to tears again.

* * *

><p>Paige woke up with a stiff neck from the position in which she'd
fallen asleep on the couch. She felt the weight of Emily's head
against her chest, and Emily's hand firmly planted against her ribs.
She started to cry, for reasons that she didn't understand. There was
just the feeling, inside her somewhere, that everything was right
again.<p>

The heaving in Paige's chest as she sobbed caused Emily to stir.
Paige shushed her gently, stroking her hair. When Emily was fully
asleep again, Paige wiped the last tears from her cheek and stood,
taking Emily with her, smiling at the way that Emily's arms
automatically found their way around her neck. She carried Emily to
her bed and laid her down, only hesitating for a moment before lying
next to her. She knew that it was right. They hadn't discussed it in
so many words, but they had settled it. They were together.

* * *

><p>Emily's phone woke her early the next morning. She reached for it
blindly, patting her hand around the bedside table until found the
spot where Paige had set it after she pulled it out of Emily's back
pocket when she put her to bed. Emily read the text before she
checked beside her, hoping beyond hope that she wasn't
alone.<p>

"Who is it?" Paige asked sleepily. Somehow, they were back to the
place where that question wasn't an invasion of Emily's
privacy.

"Biff, from work," Emily said. "He wants to know whether I'm going to make it back for my shift tonight."

Paige leaned up on her elbow. "Emily, do you really like that job?"

Emily's face lit up when she realized what Paige was actually asking. "No," she said enthusiastically. She could give it up. Find something closer in Palo Alto. Maybe even apply to schools in the area.

Emily put her arms behind Paige's neck and gave her the kiss that they had been waiting for since Paige got on that plane to California. Paige rolled over, lying on top of Emily as she continued the kiss. It was an apology; a promise. It was everything that Paige had wanted to tell Emily, and everything that Paige, herself, needed to hear. Emily's hands drifted down to Paige's back, forcefully pulling Paige in closer; moaning as Paige reflexively swiveled her hips into Emily's; nodding when Paige paused to stare into Emily's eyes for confirmation about what was coming next.

A look of contentment settled over Emily's face as she lifted her arms, allowing Paige to help her out of her shirt. This was it. She was home, at last.

**ALL THE LEAVES ARE BROWN...**

Paige groaned, caught off guard and thrown off rhythm by the blaring of her alarm. Emily pulled her back down and kissed her back into the moment. The music was fine. For the first time in a long time, the song rang true.

* * *

><p><strong>AN - Last one-shot before I buckle down and get to work on a prompt for a new Paily multi-chapter... Please stay tuned! :)

><strong>

End
file.